

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **A-19**

WASHINGTON POST
5 October 1985

Richard Cohen

Again, the West Bank

Not quite a month ago I sat in an office in Jerusalem and was told by Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin what he had been telling others: Jordan would be making a mistake if it allowed the PLO to use its territory for either the planning or the execution of terrorist raids against Israel. Three weeks later, Israeli jets bombed PLO headquarters near Tunis, 1,500 miles away from Jordan. You can bet, though, that Jordan's where the blast was supposed to make the most impression.

There are very few things that you can rely on in the Middle East. One, cited frequently by the Israelis in a patronizing fashion, is that it is irrational to expect their Arab neighbors to act rationally. The second, though, is that almost everything Israel does can sooner or later be tied to security concerns over the West Bank. The bombing of PLO headquarters was an example of that.

Ostensibly, Israel acted after three of its citizens were murdered in Cyprus by two Palestinians and a man identified as a Briton. Israel blamed the murders on the PLO's Force 17, elements of which make up Yasser Arafat's personal bodyguard. But Israel does not explain how it comes by its information, since the three are in Cypriot, not Israeli, custody. And other than citing the irrationality of Arabs, it cannot explain why members of an elite PLO force would simply murder three ordinary civilians and then permit themselves to be arrested.

In the end, the Cyprus incident, as gruesome as it was, may have been the pretext Israel was seeking for yet another attempt to bloody the PLO, possibly eliminate Arafat once and for all and, as a bonus, send a clear signal to Jordan. If that's the case, it would not be the first time Israel has done such a thing. In 1982 it "responded" to the shooting of its ambassador to Britain, Shlomo Argov, by sending its troops all the way to Beirut. It turned out that Argov had not been shot by the PLO. And it turned out that the man who was then Israel defense minister, Ariel Sharon, intended to invade Lebanon all along. He hoped to finish the PLO once and for all.

Then as now, Israel's concern has been the West Bank and its 750,000 Palestinian Arabs. The destruction of the PLO as a military force was supposed to accomplish the destruction of the PLO as a political force as well. Then West Bank Arabs would have no alternative but to accept the moderate leaders Israel had chosen for them. The more radical and belligerent PLO would be out of the picture. The plan did not work. The PLO, mauled by the Israeli army and then dispersed to several Arab countries, nevertheless persists as a political entity and, by Israeli testimony, a terrorist one as well.

In the Israeli view, the only thing worse than the PLO itself would be a PLO that is allowed to operate from Jordan. At the moment, that's not in the cards. But since its ejection from Lebanon, King Hussein has permitted the PLO to open a headquarters in Jordan—no more than a stone's throw from the West Bank. In his interview, Rabin said Israeli intelligence knew that several attempted terrorist operations had been planned in Jordan. In no uncertain terms, he said Israel would not allow that sort of thing to continue.

The Israeli strategy, while harsh, has the patina of logic to it: you hit your enemy and those who harbor him. But if security on the West Bank is the Israeli concern, then its real enemy is not the PLO per se, but Palestinian nationalism. Of the 16 Israelis who have died in the last year in terrorist attacks, perhaps a majority were killed by West Bank Arabs with no apparent link to the PLO but with a burning hatred for Israelis. No bombing of the PLO, no matter where it may be headquartered, will change that.

Once, the Arab states thought they could eradicate Jewish nationalism through force of arms. They failed. Now it is Israel's turn to make the same mistake. Twice now, it has struck deep into foreign territory, sending its soldiers to do what its politicians will not—solve the problem of the West Bank. For Israel, the problem is in neither Lebanon nor Tunisia, but a lot closer than that. It can dispose of its problem by disposing of the West Bank.